



Robert's Rules of Order



Michael P. May

City Attorney

Madison, Wisconsin

Updated July, 2009

Sources

- ◆ Robert's Rules of Order (10th Ed.): 700 pages
- ◆ Robert's Rules Abridged: 200 pages
- ◆ Robert's Rules In Short ("May's Manual"): 7 pages.
- ◆ Chapter 2, and sec. 33.01, MGO

Who is Robert?

- ◆ General Henry M. Robert (1837-1923), distinguished engineer.
- ◆ First codified in 1876. Now in its 10th edition.
- ◆ Now edited by Henry M. Robert III.

Purposes of Robert's Rules

- ◆ Run meetings efficiently.
- ◆ Protect the rights of the majority, the minority, individual members and absent members.
- ◆ A careful balance to allow action, and in some cases to halt action.

Meeting Agenda

- ◆ Governed by Wisconsin's Open Meeting Law (sec. 19.81, *et seq.*, Stats.) and sec. 3.71, MGO
- ◆ Agenda items must clearly apprise the public of the matter to be considered.
- ◆ No action if not on agenda and properly noticed (normally 24 hours).

Chapter 2, MGO

- ◆ Chapter 2 constitutes the standing rules for the Common Council.
- ◆ Except as modified by Chapter 2, Robert's Rules govern Council meetings. Sec. 2.32.
- ◆ Standing Order of Business, sec. 2.04.
- ◆ Introduction of Business at a prior meeting, sec. 2.05, with exceptions.

Ch. 2, MGO (cont.)

- ◆ Majority vote of all members, sec. 2.18.
- ◆ $\frac{3}{4}$ majority to change budget, sec. 2.19.
- ◆ Reconsideration, sec. 2.21.
- ◆ Time limits on speaking, sec. 2.29.
- ◆ Rules often (always?) suspended by $\frac{2}{3}$ vote to take out of order.
- ◆ Use of the Consent Agenda.

Sec. 33.01, MGO

- ◆ Governs City Boards, Committees and Commissions. Revised in 2009.
- ◆ 15 minute rule on quorum. Quorum normally is one-half plus one of authorized members (note: 14 alders for Council). Sec. 33.01(8).
- ◆ May establish own rules, otherwise apply Robert's Rules. Sec. 33.01(9)(b).
- ◆ Reports to record votes; time limit on response (normally 45 days per sec. 2.05). Sec. 33.01(11).

Sec. 33.01, MGO (cont.)

- ◆ Counting majority for vote: 33.01(8)(d), MGO
- ◆ Must be a majority of members in attendance.
- ◆ Must also be a majority of the quorum.
- ◆ “Abstain” or “present” does not destroy quorum; absence does.
- ◆ Example: 3 ayes, 4 abstentions on 7 member body.

Sec. 33.01, MGO (cont.)

- ◆ Committees must allow Council members to participate in committee meetings under sec. 33.01(9)(d), MGO.
- ◆ May ask questions and participate in debate, but may not vote or make any motions.
- ◆ Does not apply to quasi-judicial proceedings.



Role of the Chair

- ◆ Obligation to run an orderly meeting.
- ◆ Recognizes members.
- ◆ Rules on votes, subject to call for roll.
- ◆ Rules on procedure, subject to appeal to body.
- ◆ Generally, not to vote except for a tie and not to participate in debate.

Proceed by Motion!

- ◆ The most basic rule of Robert's Rules: proceed by motion.
- ◆ No magic words: “I move that_____”, “I move adoption of_____”, “Move referral.”
- ◆ Matters before Council usually have a recommendation which becomes the motion.
- ◆ Teach chair to ask for motions.

Classes of Motions

- ◆ Main motion. Underlying matter before the body.
- ◆ Subsidiary motions. To do something with or to the main motions (e.g., amend, refer).
- ◆ Incidental motions. Procedural matters related to the main motion that take precedence (e.g., point of order, suspend the rules).
- ◆ Privileged motions. Limited number that take precedence (recess, privilege, adjourn).
- ◆ See Robert's Rules, Secs. 5-6.

Fifteen Common Motions

- ◆ Robert's lists at least 84 different types of motions, Table III.
- ◆ Adjourn. Not debatable.
- ◆ Adopt.
- ◆ Amend. Normally no more than two levels of amendment allowed. Robert's, Sec. 12.
- ◆ Division of Assembly/Roll Call. Granted when asked, not debatable.
- ◆ Division of Question/Separation. Separates votes on different issues or paragraphs. Requires a second, but is not debatable.

15 Motions (cont.)

- ◆ Lay on Table/Take off Table. Temporarily delay taking action. Not debatable.
- ◆ Place on file. Use by Council and some committees, is equivalent of a motion to delay or postpone indefinitely. Non-adoption without voting it down.
- ◆ Point of Information. An incidental motion to gain information before taking further action. No second required, a member simply states “Point of information”, and is recognized.

15 Motions (cont.)

- ◆ Point of Order/Procedure. Another incidental motion, no second required. It raises a question about the procedure being used. The Chair rules on the point, subject to an appeal (which does require a second) to the full body.
- ◆ Point of Privilege. A privileged motion, no second. Relates to a personal matter.
- ◆ Previous Question. Ends debate and proceeds to an immediate vote. Requires a second, not debatable and requires a 2/3 vote.

15 Motions (cont.)

- ◆ Recess. A privileged motion. The length of the recess should be stated. Not debatable.
- ◆ Reconsideration. Asks that a matter be reconsidered. Must be made at the same or next meeting by a member who voted for the winning side.
- ◆ Referral. The matter is referred to another body or a later meeting of the same body.
- ◆ Suspend the Rules. Requires a 2/3 majority.

Consent

- ◆ Use of unanimous consent is a way to quickly move through non-controversial items.
- ◆ “Is there any objection to _____?”
- ◆ Council uses an extensive consent agenda.

Precedence of Motions

- ◆ See Robert's Rules Sec. 5 and Chart I.
- ◆ A motion is not in order when a motion with higher precedence is under consideration. The motion with precedence must be disposed of before the other motion is allowed.
- ◆ Following charts show precedence; a motion is not in order if it has a higher number than the pending matter.

Undebatable Motions

- ◆ 1. Adjourn.
- ◆ 2. Recess.
- ◆ 3. Question of Privilege.
- ◆ 4. Lay on the Table.
- ◆ 5. Previous Question
- ◆ 6. Limit or Extend Debate.

Debatable Motions

- ◆ 7. Postpone to a definite time.
- ◆ 8. Refer or commit.
- ◆ 9. Amend.
- ◆ 10. Postpone indefinitely/place on file.
- ◆ 11. Main motion.



Incidental Motions

- ◆ Incidental motions (Point or order or information, Suspend the Rules, Division of the Assembly or the Question) take precedence over whatever matter is pending.

“May’s Manual”

- ◆ Available on the City Attorney’s web page.
- ◆ <http://www.cityofmadison.com/attorney/>
- ◆ Contains a “Cheat Sheet” on common motions.



Questions?

- ◆ Call us at 266-4511
- ◆ Michael May, Larry O'Brien, Roger Allen are all familiar with Robert's Rules and city procedure.